

Institutional Injustice and Authorial Critique in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze how Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* represents systemic racism and author's critical position towards the racial injustice issue within the novel. This research applies two theories: the representation by Stuart Hall and the theory of systemic racism by Joe. R. Feagin. This research applies a qualitative method with a narrative text analysis approach. The results of this study show that systemic racism plays a role in the level of labor exploitation, economic discrimination, social inequality, and oppressive social norms. Thus, the author's position also shows an effort to criticize the unjust system. However, she notes there are still some limitations since white characters are still central to hold primary control. This study concludes that literary works can function as a medium to voice social criticism of racism, while reflecting the complexity of the author's position in shaping representations of racial injustice.

Keywords: systemic racism, representation, institutional injustice, Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*

INTRODUCTION

Systemic racism is a form of social injustice that is rooted in the social system of society and is still going on today. In the context of this research, literary works can serve as a platform to convey criticism of institutionalized and political injustice. Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* depicts the social reality that occurred in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960s, where black women as domestic workers faced various social, economic, and cultural pressures due to the institutionalized racism system. This study aims to analyze how systemic racism is represented in the novel *The Help*, as well as to explore the author's critical position in describing the issue of racial injustice.

The Help is a novel by Stockett that was first published in 2009. The book tells the story of a people living in racial tension and civil rights struggles in the 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. The story focuses on three main characters, Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter. The novel tells the story of the relationship between black workers and white employers in an unequal social situation, acts of resistance against an unequal system, displaying the conditions of injustice, and the power dynamics of that time.

Racism that occurs in social life can appear in personal and systemic forms, as explained by Jones (2000), who divides it into personally mediated racism and institutionalized racism. However, this research will focus on analyzing systemic racism, a form of discrimination embedded in social structure, law, and economy. In addition, this research will also examine the author's critical position in framing reality to analyze whether Stockett, in the narrative of his novel, shows an attitude of affirmation or rejection of the inequality mentioned.

This research applies Stuart Hall's theory of representation as the main theoretical framework to understand how the ideological meanings underlying the structure of systemic racism are formed, spread, and maintained through representations in this novel. Hall (1997) says that representation is an active process of meaning construction and not just a reflection of reality. Thus, this theory can help analyze how the characters, narratives, and situations in *The Help* represent, question, and even challenge the ideology of racism perpetrated by the dominant group in society.

This theory is also aligned with the views in Critical Race Theory developed by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), which states that laws, culture, and social structures are not neutral, but are somewhat shaped by dominant racial ideologies.

This study also applies the theory of systemic racism presented by Joe R. Feagin (2006) as the supporting theoretical framework. The theory of systemic racism explains that racism not only occurs in the form of discriminatory attitudes shown by individuals, but also discrimination embedded in social structures, institutions, and systems that have been formed over time to maintain the dominance of white people. This theory is the basis for analyzing how systemic racism is depicted in *The Help* through several aspects, such as employment, unwritten laws, public services, and social segregation faced by black characters.

THEORY

A. Representation Theory

According to Hall, representation theory is a framework that analyses how meaning is constructed and transmitted in a culture through signs, images, and language. Hall explains that representation reflects real events and is a way of shaping and conveying meaning or viewpoints about the world. In this context, representation in literary works is inseparable from the prevailing ideology in society. In other words, how events or characters are depicted in narrative texts can show how social systems and power relations work. The function of representation is as a process in which cultural meanings are created and conveyed. Hall (1997) says that representation is an active process of meaning construction and not just a reflection of reality. Symbols and language reflect the world and provide an interpretive frame that shapes how we perceive and understand various phenomena that occur in our social life. Symbols and language are important in representation theory as tools to convey meaning and ideas. Hall explains that meaning is created through the relationship between language and the concept or object it represents, which is influenced by historical and cultural context. Applying Hall's theory of representation, this research examines how racism is portrayed and interpreted through the narrative structure, characters, and storyline in *The Help*.

B. Systemic Racism Theory

This research applies Feagin's (2006) theory of systemic racism as a basis for analyzing how systemic racism is depicted in *The Help*. Feagin describes a type of racism that is not only in the form of discrimination carried out by individuals, but has also been embedded in social systems and essential institutions such as government, law, education, and the economy. Feagin explains that this system was formed by white people with more dominant power and has been going on since the 17th century. This system of racism continues to persist and develop in various forms, such as public policies, as well as both overt and covert social practices. These systems support the dominance of white people and maintain injustice for black people. This theory is very relevant to analyze how racism in *The Help* works in a widespread structure, not only as an individual act of discrimination. By applying this theory, this research aims to analyze how systemic racism is represented in *The Help*, as well as to explore how this unequal social structure is described in the content of the novel.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study applies a qualitative research approach with a narrative analysis method. The data is obtained from the novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, published in 2009. This research is descriptive-analytical and aims to identify forms of systemic racism and identify how the author's critical position in the narrative depicts racial injustice. This analysis is conducted by referring to representation theory and systemic racism theory to see the relationship between the narrative text, the meaning to be conveyed, and the ideology underlying the depiction of the issues presented.

DISCUSSION

Systemic racism is a form of racial discrimination that not only occurs in the form of discriminatory attitudes shown by individuals, but also discrimination embedded in social structures, institutions, and systems that have been formed for a long time to maintain the dominance of white people. The phenomena depicted in *The Help* do not stand alone, but rather reflect real events in American history that have become strong evidence of an entrenched system of racism. In the case of the United States in the 1960s, systemic racism was very evident in various segregation policies legalized by law, especially in the southern region. The Jim Crow Law became one of the legal instruments to separate public facilities, health services, access to education, and even residential areas based on skin color.

In the history of the United States, systemic racism is a form of social injustice that has had a significant impact on society. The form of racism that occurs is not only present through discriminatory attitudes shown by individuals, but is embedded in the social, economic, cultural, and even legal systems of the country that last for centuries (Feagin 2006). According to Feagin, this systemic racism has existed since the 17th century, which was built by white groups who tried to exert control over social and political institutions. These white groups passed down these structures from generation to generation to preserve this racial domination.

Feagin states that systemic racism affects many aspects of black people's lives in America. They face many obstacles in accessing decent work, adequate education, housing, and fair legal protection. The injustice that occurs is caused by a system that has been designed to maintain the dominance of the white group. Feagin asserts that systemic racism consists of symbolic representations, institutional practices, and government policies that all aim to maintain structural discrimination between races.

Feagin also explains that the history of colonialism and slavery has a vital role in the formation of racial discrimination in the United States. After the abolition of slavery, a system known as Jim Crow, which legally segregated black and white people in all aspects of social life, was enacted. The practice of this system has created structural injustices that persist into the 21st century. Furthermore, Feagin contends that systemic racism includes five primary elements: social inequality, racist ideology, discriminatory practices, systemic reproduction, and social domination through culture and public policy.

This theoretical explanation is reflected in historical events, which show how systemic racism works concretely in American society. In the United States, systemic racism has been perpetuated for generations through laws and social structures. For example, Jim Crow laws legally segregated black and white people in all aspects of life—education, healthcare, housing, and public spaces, especially in the South. These laws not only limited black people's access to public services, but also reinforced white supremacist ideology as a social norm. This long history of oppression against black people is also explained by Zinn (1980), who points out that social structures in America have long been designed to perpetuate institutionalized racial inequality.

One of the most obvious tragedies that shows the impact of systemic racism is the murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers in 1963. He was killed in front of his home in Mississippi for speaking out against racial injustice. This case is a clear example of the social dangers and legal vulnerabilities faced by black individuals who dared to speak out against an oppressive system. Even

the legal system at the time failed to deliver justice for years, as her alleged killer was allowed to live free for decades.

Another example of institutional racism is the practice of redlining, a discriminatory housing policy in which banks and governments categorize black neighbourhoods as "high risk", making them unable to access mortgage loans and infrastructure development (Rothstein 2017). These policies create a persistent economic divide between black and white communities, suggesting that systemic racism is maintained through state policies and financial structures. These policies are part of what Feagin (2006) calls the "reproduction of institutional inequality," where racial biases are embedded in bureaucratic systems.

Black women are in the most vulnerable position as objects of discrimination because they have to face double inequality: as women and as black people. They can often only find work as domestic servants, with relatively long working hours, very low wages, and no legal protection. This view is in line with Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes that black women experience multiple oppressions due to the intersection of race and gender in the dominant system. Real-life cases such as the murder of activist Medgar Evers in 1963, or injustices in the judicial and electoral systems, show how racism has been part of the social structure that has been passed down from previous generations. This form of discrimination in the world of work experienced by black women is also reinforced by the opinion (Reskin 2012), which states that the employment system in America is formed to perpetuate views based on race and gender. In this context, the novel *The Help* becomes one of the most influential instruments to be read and understood. This novel not only describes fictional events, but also becomes a reflection in understanding the social and political dynamics that occurred in that era and how the representation of racial issues is conveyed to today's readers.

Throughout the history of the United States, systemic racism has been a form of social injustice that has significantly affected the structure and dynamics of society. The form of racism that occurs is not only present through discriminatory attitudes shown by individuals, but is embedded in the social, economic, cultural, and even legal systems of the country that last for centuries (Feagin, 2006). According to Feagin, this systemic racism has existed since the 17th century, which was built by white groups who tried to dominate control over social and political institutions. These white groups passed down these structures from generation to generation to preserve this racial domination.

Feagin states that systemic racism affects many aspects of black people's lives in America. They face many obstacles in accessing decent work, adequate education, housing, and fair legal protection. The injustice that occurs is caused by a system that has been designed to maintain the dominance of the white group. Feagin asserts that systemic racism consists of symbolic representations, institutional practices, and government policies that all aim to maintain structural discrimination between races.

Feagin also explains that the history of colonialism and slavery has a vital role in the formation of racial discrimination in the United States. After the abolition of slavery, a legal system known as Jim Crow was enacted in the post-slavery United States, which legally segregated black and white communities in various aspects of social life. This system was passed in the post-slavery United States and became the basis for decades of racial segregation. The practice of this system has created structural injustices that persist into the 21st century. Furthermore, Feagin contends that

systemic racism includes five main elements: social inequality, racist ideology, discriminatory practices, systemic reproduction, and social domination through culture and public policy.

Systemic Racism in *The Help*

The phenomenon of systemic racism that occurs in *The Help* is depicted through the structure of the relationship between white and black characters. Characters like Aibileen and Minny represent black women who work as domestic servants under the control of an unbalanced social system. They have to face discriminatory treatment every day, such as segregated toilet facilities, low salaries, and the threat of unilateral dismissal without legal protection. One of the most visible forms of racism is the segregation of toilets for black maids, who are prohibited from using the same facilities as their employers, which symbolically reinforces their subordinate position in the household and society. In addition, the novel also shows how stereotypes of stupidity or violence are systematically imposed on black characters. They not only experience economic discrimination, but also psychological and symbolic violence daily.

The practice of racism is also shown through differences in educational status and the right to speak. Black characters live in limitations in the social structure and are not given the freedom of space to develop for their group (Wardani et al., 2023). The norms in the Jackson, Mississippi community blatantly instill the separation of scope based on skin color. Even when they speak out about rights and injustices, their voices must be channeled through white role models like Skeeter. Stockett builds this narrative by presenting various events experienced by the characters that show that these injustices are not the result of one or two people but a larger and institutionalized system. Within the framework of Feagin's theory of systemic racism, this condition is the result of a long historical process that continues to be inherited and reinforced through social norms and cultural institutions. The influence of this systemic injustice not only affects the daily lives of the black characters, but also shows how this social and cultural system is to maintain structural white domination.

To explain the forms of systemic racism in a more structured way, the following discussion categorizes the issue into three main aspects: labor exploitation and power relations, violence and unfair laws, and segregation in public institutions and community services. The first aspect is labor exploitation and power relations, where black domestic workers are structurally placed in economic dependency. White employers have complete control over working hours, wages, and even access to basic amenities. This form of systemic subordination is not only material, but also symbolic, as it maintains the dominance of white identity over the personal autonomy and living space of black domestic workers. Feagin's concepts of "material advantage" and "everyday discrimination" can be seen in how these black women are excluded from basic human dignity and fair labor norms. This power dynamic is maintained through unwritten social norms and the absence of legal protections, making black women vulnerable to exploitation, intimidation, and abuse.

The second aspect is violence, criminalization, and unfair laws. The legal system in *The Help* reflects the fact that black people often receive harsher punishments, even for minor offenses or acts of survival. Coates (2015) also highlights how the practice of mass incarceration of black people in the United States has undermined family structures and become a new form of race-based social control. In this structure, the law does not function as a neutral arbiter, but rather as a tool to reinforce racial boundaries and maintain white dominance. This systemic criminalization becomes

a way to discredit and dehumanize black individuals while providing impunity for the dominant group. The violence is not only physical, but also structurally embedded in fear and the silencing of black voices through the threat of legal and extrajudicial punishment. Alexander (2010) in *The New Jim Crow* explains that the American criminal justice system has served as a continuation of the segregation system, leading to covert racial discrimination through legal policies.

The third aspect is segregation in public institutions and community services, such as schools, hospitals, and residential areas. Black communities are portrayed as marginalized, living in crowded conditions, and systematically excluded from infrastructure development. Access to resources such as education and healthcare is not only socially segregated, but also legally and institutionally designed. This reflects Feagin's concept of "residential segregation" and "institutional reproduction of inequality", where systemic structures continue to maintain material and symbolic control over Black lives across generations. Educational curricula, housing policies, and the distribution of public services are all part of a larger discriminatory system that determines values and rights based on race.

To strengthen the analysis, findings from previous research and expert opinions also support that the forms of injustice displayed in this novel reflect real conditions and oppressive social structures. Jones (2000) states that racism not only arises individually, but is also structured in long-standing legal, economic, and social systems. He divides racism into three levels: internalized, personally mediated, and institutionalized racism. In the context of the novel *The Help*, the form of racism depicted is mainly related to institutional racism, as described by Jones as a form of discrimination embedded in institutional policies and practices that systematically disadvantage certain groups.

Ara dan Hassan (2021) in their research also show how *The Help* contains various criticisms of the racist system, primarily through black female characters who are victims of exploitation. However, they also highlighted how these representations did not fully liberate black characters' voices from white characters' narrative dominance. This reinforces the argument that power structures in literary representations can still perpetuate domination, even when intending to convey social criticism. These findings strengthen the argument that representations of racism in novels are relevant to historical realities and receive support from broader theories and scholarly studies.

Thus, *The Help* represents how the power relations shown by the white group towards the black group are built and maintained to maintain the dominance of the white group through several mechanisms: labor exploitation, segregation, absolute control in the economy of workers, and providing benchmarks for social identity. These mechanisms are in line with what Feagin (2006) said about systemic racism, which explains that racial discrimination is not only the result of individual actions, but is incorporated into complex social and economic rules.

Author Critical Position

Stockett tries to criticize racial discrimination by empathetically highlighting the hardships experienced by black characters. She portrays the character of Aibileen in a very human way, a figure full of compassion, patience, and extraordinary fortitude. Minny is portrayed as a brave figure who maintains her self-esteem despite the pressure. Through these characters, Stockett tries to elevate the dignity of black women excluded from the dominant narrative in American history. As

McDonald (2005) explains, black women are often erased from dominant historical narratives, so the portrayal of characters like Aibileen and Minny can be read as an attempt to recover this space of representation.

To broaden our understanding of the author's critical position, we can look at how this empathic narrative is constructed while at the same time exposing the limitations of the representational structure used. A deeper explanation of the author's critical position can be seen from how Stockett builds an empathetic narrative, but also has limitations in the structure of representation used. Stockett not only represents systemic racism in *The Help*, but also takes a critical position towards the discriminatory treatment experienced by black women in American society. This critical stance is conveyed through narrative devices, dialogue between characters, and the depiction of the setting of Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960s, which form a social atmosphere full of injustice. Referring to Hall's theory of representation, narratives in literary texts do not merely reflect reality, but actively shape meaning and ideology. In this context, *The Help* becomes a representational space Stockett uses to convey social criticism through ideologically charged narratives.

Furthermore, the author's critical dimension is also evident from the representation of the ideological transformation experienced by the main character. Stockett's critical stance can be seen in Skeeter's character, who begins to question the racist norms she previously took for granted. This narrative shift suggests ideological distance, in line with Hall's idea that representation can open up discursive space and challenge dominant values. Similarly, Aibileen's emotional suffering after losing her son and Minny's resistance become narrative tools to frame oppression and provide space for counter-discourse to domination.

In the context of postcolonial discourse, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) emphasize that representation in literary texts often becomes a tool to maintain ideological domination, even though it is packaged in the form of criticism. Dubois (2004) in his study of the Haitian Revolution shows that racial oppression is often resisted through symbolic representations and counter-narratives that emerge from oppressed groups.

However, despite these efforts, the novel's narrative still shows limitations. Some critics argue that Skeeter is still the primary agent of change, while the agency of black characters remains in his shadow. This narrative choice reflects the "white saviour" pattern, where the empowerment of black voices is mediated through the intervention of white figures. This represents what Bonilla-Silva (2003) calls colour-blind racism, a form of racism that operates by claiming racial impartiality, but maintains structures of inequality through dominant narratives. Stockett herself admits that she does not fully understand the experiences of black women during segregation, but she hopes to create a space for empathy and reflection. This admission shows a sincere intention and an awareness of the limitations of her perspective as a white writer.

Thus, *The Help* can be read as a dialectical text, offering a critique of racial injustice and reproducing established patterns of domination. Representation in the novel is complex and layered, reflecting the tension between resistance and compromise. This reinforces Hall's idea that literary works, as cultural products, are arenas of ideological struggle where meaning is constantly negotiated and contested.

However, this critical position still has limitations in the form of a dominant narrative structure. Skeeter, a white woman, is the primary agent in the change process. It was she who took

the initiative to write a book about the experiences of black maids. This shows that although the story tries to make room for the voices of discriminated groups, the narrative is still controlled by characters from the dominant group, namely, from the white group. Although the author's intention seems sincere, the pattern used still shows limitations because it still uses a typical narrative structure in several works with racial themes, namely presenting a white character who becomes a "white savior" character (Ara and Hassan 2021).

Within the framework of Hall's theory of representation, this narrative can be seen as an arena of struggle for meaning. The representations in *The Help* critique a racist system, but also reproduce patterns of domination. Social critique is delivered, but in a comfortable style for readers from the majority group. *The Help* succeeds in voicing criticism of racial injustice. Still, it remains within the boundaries of the dominant structure that makes black voices a complement to the narrative, not as the main center of the struggle. Thus, in this case, the author's position can be categorized as dialectical, where he shows a critical attitude towards racism. Still, his depiction is not entirely separated from her ideological boundaries and social identity.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Stockett's *The Help* represents systemic racism as an institutionalized racial injustice in various aspects of the social, economic, and cultural life of American society, especially during the 1960s. Through characters such as Aibileen and Minny, readers are invited to see how black groups experience labor exploitation, marginalization in residential areas, and silencing in a system that does not provide space for freedom to develop and equality.

Stockett also tries to show a critical position towards the racist system through an empathetic narrative that focuses on depicting the experiences of black women. However, on the other hand, the involvement of white characters like Skeeter is still a significant factor in social change, which shows that the criticism built is still within the limits of the dominant representational framework. This shows that literary works are not always neutral but provide a space where meanings, ideologies, and power relations interact and are negotiated.

Thus, *The Help* can be understood as a work that voices criticism of systemic racism, but also reflects the complexity of the author's position in the challenge of presenting a fair and equal representation. This finding reinforces Hall's concept of representation that the production of meaning in a text is always related to the author's ideological, social, and identity context.

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